

# SIX ESSAYS ON ABBY HELLER-BURNHAM



## Preface

As may or may not be obvious from the essays which follow, I'm not a trained art critic. Where visual art is concerned, I'd call myself about half-trained. I often fall back, in these contexts, on the dialects of literary theory; and there are many nuances of art theory I only half understand. Nevertheless, if I venture to write about Abby Heller-Burnham's paintings, partly it is because the manifest aesthetic superiority of her vision is so blatant that even a half-seasoned sensibility can do it some justice; the other, more salient reason and purpose behind these essays is just to initiate a discourse which can be developed by others with more competency to do so. That having been said, my basic supposition regarding Heller-Burnham's work may pass muster as relevant— that, formally and thematically, there is no equal for Heller-Burnham after Picasso. Heller-Burnham's work is rigorous on a number of different levels— formally, in the double handful of her major paintings, she never repeats herself, and employs the entire history of Western art as a reference point (Abby always especially praised Ingres and David); thematically, it is not in character for her to be singular, but instead to tackle three or four major themes simultaneously. "The Walls Have Ears" takes queerness, turns it inside out and expands it— the figures express not only the vagaries of female sexuality but the role of art in exposing and exploring these vagaries, and the manner in which art and life are forced by uncomfortable circumstance to overlap— it is subjectively confessional and objectively a meta-painting at the same time.

Whenever Heller-Burnham deals formally in abstraction, as in "Ghost of Day," it is always meant to accompany solid and substantial forms, rather than to stand on its own— I take "Ghost of Day" as a self-portrait dealing thematically with the artist's intellect, and intellectual enlightenment. The abstract, ornamental forms discussed in the essay which links Heller-Burnham with Picasso and Klimt, serve to represent a balanced intellect at peace with itself; it can be taken as Heller-Burnham's echo of Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." The emotional resonance is with exultant joy— and within her dozen masterpieces, Heller-Burnham covers the gamut of human emotional range beautifully. It may be that, for this contemporary epoch, "The Skaters" will become Heller-Burnham's signature painting— a dark, moody, simultaneously convex and concave exploration of urban space, which can be taken as a synecdoche of America's Recessional entropy, but also works formally as just particularly what it is.

As for these essays— putting Heller-Burnham against Picasso, Klimt, Degas, Wyeth, and Nauman served a useful purpose— to demonstrate (with Picasso and Degas) those from visual art's past who have at least parity with Heller-Burnham, and how their visual tropes recur in Heller-Burnham's work; and also, to restate my often-argued hypothesis that most twentieth century art (literary and visual) is derelict, and veered either too much towards the ditch of emptiness and stasis-in-irony on one side, and of platitudinous complacency on the other. Abby Heller-Burnham's paintings have invented their own avant-garde— a congeries of new forms and compulsively multiple and multiplying themes. What's strong in these brief essays is a kind of boldness, born from assaying something new and unusual; I hope their lack of development, intellectual and otherwise, will be forgiven. Sometimes, the imperative must be to act, and let the pieces fall where and when they may.

Adam Fieled, 2013

## Ornamentation: Klimt, Heller-Burnham, Picasso



Among many, two key concepts were lost in late twentieth century art which have animated the arts for the whole length of human history: joy and beauty. Joy and

beauty were largely lost, in the modern and post-modern eras, in new imperatives towards irony, humor, nihilism, disjuncture, minimalism, absurdism, and combinations of all these. The three paintings I have thrown together here; “Ghost of Day” by Abby Heller-Burnham, “Woman Reclining with a Book (Marie-Therese Walter)” by Pablo Picasso, and “The Kiss” by Gustav Klimt; are what I would call “ornamental” works of art. They explore to find vistas of joy (which is simple to understand) and beauty (which is very difficult to understand indeed, and changes from era to era and context to context). For Klimt, there were few vistas he opened that didn’t have to do with joy, beauty, and ornamentation (like Matisse); for Picasso and Heller-Burnham, exploring the ornamental was a way of balancing oeuvres which lean heavily on darkness, edginess, technical and thematic innovation, and profound seriousness. Heller-Burnham’s piece is a self-portrait; what seems to lend joy to her construct is a sense of “roundness” or wholeness which, from the fact that we see her head and not her body, implies an engagement with the intellect and intellectual beauty. Picasso’s vision of his mistress Marie-Therese Walter is more overtly sexualized; her own joy and bodily relaxation is balanced by the roundedness of her body. Picasso’s trick of facial inversions by the time he painted this dictated that Walter’s face express a sense of being “de-centered”; but the painting expresses a centralized harmony issuing from a rounded, relaxed, sexualized body and the dusky wholesomeness of solid blues, greens, and grays, all “spring” tones. Major artists have to be well-rounded; a single imperative repeated ad nauseum has never sufficed. If Heller-Burnham emerges as a major twenty-first century artist, it is because she has refused to ignore a plethora of imperatives which the late twentieth century ditched just to fit a cramped, one-dimensional, joyless and unbeautiful mold.

## Dance, Song, and the Festive



What Abby Heller-Burnham's "Learning to Dance" and Picasso's "Old Guitarist" have in common is a strange and intricate architecture, oriented around the celebratory aspects of human experience; in this case, dance and song. The composition of Heller-Burnham's painting is positively giddy; the motif of a spatial "double," one slightly taller than the other, repeats almost infinitely, through every figure to every slightly smaller figure and through the form of the building too. In Heller-Burnham's case, the "doubles" are all verticals; just as dancing is done vertically. In Picasso, the ecstatic nature of the piece expresses itself in dozens of vertical to horizontal harmonies; lineation infused with the harmony of song. Though this Picasso piece is from his blue period, the old guitarist expresses a certain amount not only of harmony but of dignity in his elegant posture and limbs. Likewise, Heller-Burnham's dancers are lean and graceful, even as the color range she employs is dusky. If chiaroscuro were absent in either case, the paintings would lose a sense of balance and edge. Part of the festive expressed here is that the darkness is included. When everything is balanced, solidity emerges in both cases which enables all the optic tricks to work their magic without being cloying.

# Innocence and Experience



Conveying the transience of innocence and the richness of experience has always been one task of serious artists; but, very noticeably, this imperative-to-represent was missing in twentieth century art. Experience was very highly prized over innocence, and the delicate transitions between the two represented scantily. One thing Abby Heller-Burnham's paintings do is to make a formal and thematic advance on the best paintings of the nineteenth century, while bypassing the detours of abstraction and superficiality which make a trivialized travesty of the twentieth (with the notable exception of Picasso and a few others). Two paintings are presented here: the "Blue Dancers" of Edgar Degas, and Abby Heller-Burnham's "The Skaters." If Degas' work has in it here a cutting edge, it's that the gracefulness and harmonious interaction of the three dancers is undercut by the shocking rawness of the blue coloration. Not

just a blue is used but almost a livid blue, suggesting pain and discomfort, but also contemplation, meditation, and spiritual growth out of this discomfort; in other words, the process of growing up. Heller-Burnham's skaters are bound together by the stark desolation of an urban setting; but the chiaroscuro around them suggests the freedoms and intermittent joys of urban adolescence. Rather than Degas' interlocking limbs, we have Heller-Burnham's sliced-and-diced spatial contours, which pair figures with open passages and trails to follow. Neither picture conveys what the experience of childhood and adolescence will deliver to each set of three kids, or shies away from recounting the darker edges of maturational processes; what we experience is a world multifarious enough in possibilities to grant that experiences gained in innocence may lead to interlocking harmonies or blueness, opened passages or shadow.



## Doubles: Pablo Picasso and Abby Heller-Burnham



Sometimes, I think I have a greater understanding than I did in my twenties of why Jacques Derrida was led to talk “around” painting. The deconstructive approach to symbolic representation cuts and cuts until only shards are left; and these two symbolic representations, by Pablo Picasso and Abby Heller-Burnham, are so rich in possible interpretive “additions,” especially in the chiasmus between them, that it is painful for one who wants to propel two sequential centuries forward simultaneously to think of the cutting process; or, as old blues songs would have it, to walk the killing floor. One reason to talk “around” the two paintings together is because the chiasmus enriches two representational symbols already thematically and formally loaded with ore; another (which I will partially cop to) is pure intellectual laziness, in a state of dazzled befuddlement.

Picasso’s “La Vie,” from his blue period in 1903, has, in the robed female on the right holding the child seemingly stripped from his parents, a figure who may be taken as pure allegory among a host of doubled symbols; the meta-painted couple clinging together in their nudity for the fore-grounded couple also doing the same; and the meta-painted kneeling man, lost in thought or slumber, doubling the child in the arms of the robed woman. If the crux of the painting seems to be the robed woman in blue, and the painting is called “La Vie” (“Life”), the robed woman in blue is a figure allegorically representing human life in some essential way; the human animal reproduces, and the child grows away from his parents, and the cycle repeats infinitely, or until the curtain closes on humanity as a species. The rhythm of the composition flows into the standing man’s pointed finger, and into the robed woman,

suggesting his psychological awareness of how the life cycle works, and the woman's gaze follows his gesture. It's the acquisition of wisdom from grief; that is one major subtext of a painting that carries many levels of richness.

The grief acquired in Abby Heller-Burnham's painting is also grief in a process of multiplication; but it is grief is a multiplication of selves, rather than in the process of reproduction. The painting's narrative splits down the middle once the ambiguity is made visible that the twins may be in fact an ocular illusion, or one person seen twice. Because it is set in an art gallery, Heller-Burnham's painting has just as much of a hinge towards being "meta" as Picasso's does; but "meta" here is a restaging of what is already happening when we view the painting. The maze Heller-Burnham creates has more convolutions and doubles in it than Picasso's does; and because we are viewing a "twinning" figure, or twins, viewing a series of three paintings in which woman are shown in the midst of contradictory activities, the basic allegory seems to be that the painter/narrator is representing a sense of confusion about the "staging of the feminine"; specifically, the staging of the feminine within the aesthetic. But with light pouring in at either end, and with the addition of two seemingly random figures in both openings, the symbol has a hinge to nullity and absurdity even in the context of the painting, which has the contradictory effect of staging not merely the feminine but self-transcendence within the feminine.

# Post and Post-Post Modern Self-Portraiture



During the heyday of post-modern art, from about 1965 to 2000, audiences would look at a minimalist piece like Bruce Nauman's "Self-Portrait as a Fountain" (pictured above) as representative of a certain cutting edge, away from depth and towards surfaces and ironies. If we take Abby Heller-Burnham's "The Walls Have Ears" (also pictured above) as a kind of self-portrait, we get sleek surfaces, ironies, and even the kind of absurdities which animated Nauman's most famous works (look at how the composition places Heller-Burnham's head, in a picture on the wall, ensuring super-humorous "meta-consonance" in the painting, opposing in diagonal rhythm the head of the seated girl in the foreground). If something makes Heller-Burnham's self-portrait richer than Nauman's, it's that she manages to work in a complex narrative, as Nauman does not; are the figures in the painting Heller-Burnham's lovers (thus charging it with homoerotic intentionality and import), or ex-lovers, or lovers of merely her art, or merely her body, and how do they all relate to each other? Heller-

Burnham has a Trickster's eye for how to exploit spatial dimensions to her advantage; the women, and the way spaces are sliced and diced, suggest that the artist finds herself in confinement in relation to the social, sexual, and artistic circumstances around her. Nauman is just an impish kid in comparison. And there's no real reason to view "Self-Portrait as a Fountain" more than once. "The Walls Have Ears" is so endlessly suggestible that to do it justice either formally or thematically could fill a long expanse of well-spent time.

## Abby Heller-Burnham and Andrew Wyeth



Abby Heller-Burnham and Andrew Wyeth are both painters associated with the Philadelphia area. Heller-Burnham's "Frozen Warnings" and Wyeth's "Christina's World" share a concern with open spaces, negative spaces, and the spatial dimensions of human consciousness. What is most striking in the contrast between the two, is that Heller-Burnham manages to work into her narrative a sexualized element; the two figures in the painting being a young man and a young woman. Both Christina and the two figures Heller-Burnham represents are set in a bleakly desolate, pastoral landscape; Wyeth's is a scene which could be spring or autumn, Heller-Burnham's is decidedly and defiantly wintry. But because Heller-Burnham also builds in a level of sexuality, her painting seems, in a contradictory way, warmer and less forbiddingly solipsistic than Wyeth's (the solipsism being both in Wyeth and in his Christina), more attuned to depths and dimensions of humanistic interest and representation. The two compositions are strikingly similar enough that Heller-Burnham was clearly thinking of her fellow Philadelphian when she painted "Frozen Warnings"; if, ultimately, her painting is richer, it is because her two characters are involved in a more complex narrative than Christina is; both dealing with the interiorized harsh landscape of their relationship and the harsh physical landscape, while Christina is more one-dimensionally focused on outward, exteriorized forms, bleakly desolate but simple.

\*\*\*All pieces written by Adam Fieled\*\*\*





